

PAST TIMES



EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is another in our recurring series of articles reprinted from previous issues of INFANTRY and its predecessors, the INFANTRY SCHOOL QUARTERLY and the MAILING LIST. Slightly edited for use here, it originally appeared in INFAN-

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The late Charles L. Black, who was associate editor and military reporter for the Columbus (Georgia) Enquirer when he wrote this article, was an eyewitness observer of the 1967 war in the Middle

East and had written extensively about it. He had spent more than 30 months in Vietnam during five trips there, and had served as a noncommissioned officer in the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II and the Korean War.

THE MIDDLE EAST A Traveler's Guide

CHARLES L. BLACK

You can find it all in the Middle East, if you shop around for it. Desert heat, sand, soaring mountains, rough plateaus, freezing wind, and snow—even rice paddies down along the Caspian's southern shores.

Let's try it like this for openers: Once I heard a story in that region about a scorpion and a turtle. The story could have happened in Cyprus, Egypt (UAR), Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, or Yemen.

The scorpion was an old desert varmint who simply got sick and tired of sand, hills, and steep impassable ravines. So he moved to the grass and palms and took up residence near a handy rock. The rock could have been in the Kingdoms of Iran, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia; the shiekhdoms of Bahrain, Qatar, or the Trucial States; the sultanate of Muscat and Oman, or even the emirate of Kuwait.

Trouble was, the turtle, an old river critter from way back, had sunned on that

rock for many years. When he napped, it put him up out of reach of an old crocodile and a young crocodile. In the course of events, the turtle and the scorpion became bitter enemies. (You'd think in an area equal to the size of the United States that they could find two rocks, wouldn't you? But then, turtles and scorpions aren't all that different from humans.)

One day a brushfire got started in the camel scrub over near some oils wells. The scorpion had seen plenty of these before, but this was a bad one and was headed his way on the wind.

The fire finally set the grass by the river ablaze. The scorpion was not only frightened, but also in a new situation. His experience out in the dunes, rocky hills, and dry plateaus hadn't included fires.

The grass was blazing away fiercely now. The turtle stirred, chose a course across the river secure from crocodiles and prepared to swim to the safe bank.

The frantic scorpion suddenly hailed his old enemy. "Turtle, I can't swim and that fire is going to kill me if you don't help me across this river," he wailed.

The turtle considered this, then gave a great smile. "Damned if it won't," he chuckled and waddled toward the water.

The scorpion leaped off the rock and tugged out his purse.

"Here's my whole fortune. I'll give it to you for one ride across the river," he offered.

"You know, I'd be out of my mind to help you. I have to hold my head out to swim. You'd sting me and I'd die," the turtle said.

Finally the scorpion convinced the turtle that it would be stupid for him to sting his temporary ally—he'd drown. So they started the journey, the scorpion atop the turtle's shell and scared to death of the water at first, the turtle terrified of the passenger.

Then they got accustomed to it and

even liked it. The scorpion, out of gratitude, felt friendly toward the turtle for a change. The turtle enjoyed showing somebody—even an old enemy—his special world and capabilities.

Then about halfway across, lulled by the breeze and water noise, the scorpion looked down and saw the turtle's head, aimed at the safe shore and making a strong ripple. It was such a peaceful moment that he stretched and yawned before he stung the turtle.

The turtle convulsed and sank, not coming up again at all, as turtles do. The scorpion glubbed but went up and down 13 times, as scorpions do.

The old crocodile, who didn't often get big crunchy turtles in this complicated new time, crunched. The young crocodile, who had yet to acquire a taste for peppery things, snapped up the scorpion.

"Uncle, why did the scorpion sting the turtle, when he knew he would drown?" he asked the older crocodile.

The old croc' shrugged his shoulders and cried a few tears, as crocodiles do. "It's the Middle East," he said.

That's how it is. There are great desert areas, mountain ranges, seacoasts, and plateaus. There are places that would make you think of Vietnam. There are great ancient and crowded cities, cheek by jowl with great, vast, dry, and empty wildernesses.

WHOLE BOOK

To fight there you'll need the whole book. Not just the desert book, and particularly not desert books that faded memory and romantic hindsight seem to have written—something out of a movie about Rommel in which fleets of armor perform vast naval-style maneuvers across a sea of sand. It wasn't that way even in North Africa some days, you know.

When you move from the general theater to the specific fighting pit, you're apt to draw almost anything for terrain. There are other things you can be certain of, though. There will be rules of engagement and it's a good bet they won't allow shooting up friendly oil resources, antiquities, or aqueducts. There probably

will be international press in numbers dwarfing even the press corps of Vietnam. Plan for this factor now. It's time to recognize its implications and military import.

There are more places you can get to only by walking, climbing, or taking a helicopter than there are places you can arrive at by wheels or tracks. You can study caravan maps from Marco Polo's day, or old Roman or Persian road maps, and find just about all the surface corridors in the 1970s that are fit for your caravans and chariots.

Some new concepts of politico-populace-military relationships based on what we've learned—or even on what we haven't learned—in Vietnam should be developed before we even consider operating in the Middle East (or anyplace else) where our forces would be for longer than 30 days.

You will have medical problems along the same order as in Southeast Asia, plus a few local improvements and modifications.

MAINTENANCE

Plan for maintenance problems, as if you were operating around Cam Ranh Bay—but without the bay. Plan as if this were an amphibious operation where logistics is concerned. Take it with you, as much as you can of what you will need the most right after you land. You may have a hard time getting things, except by air.

Be prepared for relatively high quality and sophistication in indigenous air forces, both those of your buddies and those of the local bad guys. Be ready for indigenous ground forces on both sides that can't guarantee to resupply themselves after they've shot up their basic load or eaten what they have in their pockets. Be prepared for armies that, with some few notable exceptions, have had a gulf between the leaders and the led ever since the time of Darius. Be prepared for the venal motive and the political undercurrent.

Above all, remember that the classic fights of the region don't give you the handle to all of the terrain problems you

may face. In 1967 there was not only the Sinai, but also the Golan Heights and Jerusalem. Thinking only about desert problems in relation to this particular theater can give you 40 years in the wilderness instead of six days to objectives.

Here are some general conditions I think will prevail. It will be an allied operation, stacked up against just who you think it will be against. You'll have to be the one to do it quickly. It will probably come when a situation has already exploded and the borders or perimeters are badly bent the wrong way. You'll have to stabilize the situation to start.

It will be baked from one of the following recipes:

- Overt invasion of our friendly country, including large unit operations by a major power, either on its own in areas where the map allows, or in concert with local henchmen.

- A local affair of arms with major powers directly involved, but without their big ground battalions fielded.

- Insurgency inspired and supported from the outside, a la Algeria or a few other places you might call to mind, which caused a threat that couldn't be endured.

AIRBORNE

Everything that happens that isn't airborne will be channelized. This is one certain characteristic of the entire area. From south to north and east to west, the Middle East channels armies, navies, and camel caravans. What geography won't do, economics, politics, and the demands of psychological warfare will do. I repeat, you will be hemmed in by oil, water, and antiquities as effectively as by mountains, loose sand, and logistics.

Armor that is channelized and all alone will meet only death by air. Armor can't operate alone without at least local air superiority and air parity across the board. The side with the best and most effective air support will win, unless the most imaginative and daring use of helicopter mobility is able to pull a near thing out. Airmobility adds a factor to the air business.

The enemy coming against you will



Desert track.

have strong armor columns or task forces attacking along roads. Behind his assault points, which will be traveling as fast and as steadily as possible, he'll have problems. His logistics will be haphazard, stretched out from vulnerable depots along vulnerable roads. His supply will never be even a step ahead of the game, but always a few steps behind it, trying to catch up. He'll have his forward lines of communication cluttered with armor in convoy. Disruptions of his forward progress at the front will be viewed by his logisticians as a secret blessing, allowing them to get matters in hand, and will cause jubilation among his engineers, trying to get roads and bridges put back together.

He will either have air supremacy from preemptive strikes on friendly airfields or, if denied that, air superiority prior to our entry. His efficiency with his air probably won't be as good as that of the friendly force surviving. By our standards it will lack quick responsiveness for close tactical support and will be slower to react to tactical opportunities—but he will have a lot of it.

Get helicopters on hand quickly. They will be your salvation. Get them operative and flying. Put a priority on maintenance people and parts. The same things will break on choppers there that broke in Vietnam. Depend on it, and provide for it at the start.

Now, to regroup this narrative:

Phase one for you is getting on the ground.

Phase two is rescuing the situation. I would commence it as soon as I had the capacity for airmobile operations and enough jets to keep me alive. This will be airmobile almost entirely. Helicopters and jets will have to rescue the wagon train.

Phase three is counteroffensive, naturally. (You did remember to send some tanks after I flew off, didn't you?)

Phases four through thirty-two come when you and your comrades with friendly flags have earned what our leaders think is sufficient to allow representatives to sit down at the table and play diplomatic poker.

Now for specifics:

Artillery raids will be one of your most effective opening bids. Batteries sling-loaded into position, shooting at targets of opportunity and slingloaded out of there to another position, will be one of the best tactics you can employ quickly. Aerial field artillery and air cavalry troops will be critical, as will combined tube artillery raids and helicopter antitank attacks.

Airmobile raids on enemy artillery, remembering that his stuff up forward will probably be self-propelled and armored, is something you'll have to do. Thank the Lord He gave you night, too. Use small landing zones, hidden by terrain features, at night. If we can't do better, we'll have

to use the technique of bringing choppers in singly, infiltrating a force to the target area using pathfinder teams, portable beacons, common sense, and uncommon daring to get away with it. Large night air assaults can be done, but they should go into less than obvious landing zones, so that our infantrymen's presence won't be announced before they hit the enemy perimeter.

The airmobile raiders should bangalore and satchel their way into the artillery section of enemy defenses, then spread out and commit damage. Then they must regroup and make it back to a pick-up zone. We should know the book on that kind of foray by now, shouldn't we?

There is a certain amount of history indicating that single helicopters, at least, aren't easy MiG targets if the pilots have practiced some basic tactics. Six helicopters in the Middle East that I know of have survived the experience without a scratch. There is a crying need right now for the Air Force to get with the Army and figure out how to escort helicopters in jet country—night and day. They might consult the same book of experience where the helicopter evasion tactics were written. There are helicopters in this world being escorted by jets now. In fact, the idea has worked out quite well.

Both helicopter tactics and jet tactics need to be written quickly, and training put into effect, or these matters will have

to be learned in the field, on the fly. This is something that should be done even if the entire Middle East lapses into peaceful quiescence and lions lie down with lambs all over the place. It's going to be needed anyplace we face air.

The TOEs of the unit I pitch into my phase one will be created as those units get off the airplanes. One thing we'll need immediately is a lot of gunships, a lot of scout ships, and a lot of Chinooks for logistics and howitzer lifts. Air cavalry squadrons, aerial field artillery, Chinooks, and 105s have a high priority right behind the people who grab the airhead itself. After that, I'd like real airmobile divisions with their full capabilities.

AIRBORNE DROPS

Airborne? If you have to—if you are willing to write off those you drop and the reason is great enough for the price—then airborne drops could be useful in phase one. It would make up for either a delay in getting lift ships into the operation or in getting airmobile units loose from whatever bear they had by the tail when the whistle blew. Smaller airborne ventures to secure artillery landing zones for fire raids, to grab critical terrain and stall an enemy until air can get at him or more force gathers and helilifts there, go ahead. Just know the risks, for they'll have to make it on their own with what you can drop them.

I don't see any crying need for any large headquarters to go flouncing off into the boondocks too quickly, not with communications as they are now and with command and control choppers around. I do see a great need, though, for somebody to open up those dusty old air assault test files and learn how to jump brigade headquarters around and about. This implies that a lot of habits picked up in Vietnam are just bad habits.

Everything must move, quickly, constantly, always purposefully, and just as long as machinery and men can stand it. Helicopters will have to fly until they break and men move and fight until they drop or the enemy is diverted, disorganized, and stalled. The enemy's rear areas, lines of communication, artillery,

convoys—these must be constantly hammered at and harassed.

So you finally stall him. Bring on Phase three, the counteroffensive. You should have a grasp of the problems confronting you by now, if you're in charge. You're not coming into this completely green. We've had a few pieces of information about the region over the years, and we've fought more than most armies have fought.

You'll see that those historical corridors are important. Bridges and passes pinch at them. Some ridges dominate them. But these aren't the target. These are simply useful things nature tossed your way to get at the target, or nuisances to overcome. The target is the other guy, his entire organization. How do you throw him into confusion, kill him, or deny him supplies, retreat and respite? That's your mission. There must be no delay, no pause, no breathing time for the enemy.

MECHANIZED INFANTRY

Mechanized infantry will be valuable and useful if you have air cover and firepower to go with it. In the kind of opposition you'll meet and the kind of channeling terrain I keep emphasizing, that means night work and punching in on narrow fronts against his night defenses.

Enemy artillery can be taken out by helicopter raids, your own artillery, and air support. Helicopter raids were used by the Israelis time and again to accomplish this. Men infiltrating under cover of terrain and darkness to a landing zone manned by pathfinders, undertaking an attack along routes scouted by patrols or air, assaulting a position with almost exactly the techniques employed by enemy sappers in Vietnam, blowing through defenses on a narrow front, fanning out inside, pulling out before the mechanized infantry-armor attack went in, has worked.

This is how I think we'll make a counteroffensive work as a complete air-ground combined arms team. The task forces will operate essentially as aircraft carriers. Jets will concentrate on keeping them alive by providing close support as

well as air cover. Helicopters will operate out of these columns, as if from aircraft carriers, finding, fixing, disorganizing the enemy in front, and screening the column's flanks. The armor task force will be a kind of self-contained team, able to give support to the choppers, react to the airmobile team's contacts, or exploit its own affairs—always covered by air, resupplied by air and moving at the best possible speed toward its objectives, for as long as it can roll and fly.

But I plead again for speed in reaching the conclusion to our part of this combat, on getting our allies and well-wishers up to take over the objectives when we have grabbed them and to form the stabilized front that will mark the end of the big fight and the start of the small fight and the big diplomacy.

DOMESTIC SUPPORT

We won't have the resources for an all-out and overwhelming operation. We won't have domestic support for a protracted engagement. My ideas about the Middle East are calculated as much as anything else to serve what I believe practical and possible. Our long trial in Vietnam has given us the experience necessary to fight anywhere—but it has also heated a domestic griddle so that we have to be careful about which part of it we land on.

To wind up this opus, let's consider some principles that I think will apply to more than just Vietnam or the Middle East and that could relate to any of the potential trouble-spots facing the Army:

Whenever it appears fairly obvious that there might be a call on Army services—and that could be anytime from one to 10 years before somebody really blows the whistle—our leaders and soldiers should carefully and deliberately study, plan, organize, and train.

When the whistle blows, we should use speed and aggressiveness to deploy, engage, achieve. . . and LEAVE.

But then, there are all kinds of contingencies and restrictions that might be placed upon you, and that's a story for another book, isn't it?